MARK FOO'S LAST RIDE

Twenty-two miles down Highway 1 from San Francisco, a craggy fist of land called Pillar Point thrusts emphatically into the cold Pacific. Friday, December 23, 1994, dawned fair over this stretch of coast. Mountainous waves crashed against the headlands, spraying up billows of mist that unfurled languidly across the beaches. Beyond the end of the point, some fifteen surfers bobbed in the winter sunlight, scanning the horizon for approaching swells.

It was not uncommon to see surfers off the point—a spot they called Mavericks—dressed in heavy, hooded wetsuits and sitting astride oversize boards. But the hovering helicopter, the three boats of photographers just outside the surf line, and the throng of spectators lining the cliffs suggested this was no ordinary surf session.

For more than a week, the largest, most perfectly shaped waves in a decade had been thundering over the reef at the end of Pillar Point. Word traveled quickly over the international surfers' grapevine: Mavericks, which had recently emerged as one of the world's heaviest waves, was going off. Upon hearing the news, a trio of renowned big-wave surfers from the Hawaiian Islands—Brock Little, Ken Bradshaw, and Mark Foo—hurried to California to join the local crew in the surf.

The names and faces of the three Hawaiians were familiar to most of the five million surfers on the planet. Who among them was top dog in the surf was a matter of lively debate, but

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there was no disagreement over who cut the highest profile out of the water.

Mark Sheldon Foo was not afflicted with an excess of modesty or self-doubt. In his résumé, he unabashedly described himself as "surfing's consummate living legend." Detractors called him grandiose, and worse, but it didn't crimp Foo's style. In his Filofax were the phone numbers of surfing's premier photographers, whom he cultivated and kept in close contact with. His picture appeared in print with uncanny frequency, and he hosted a surfing show on cable television.

Foo made no bones about his thirst for fame or his strategy for achieving it: ride the world's biggest waves with singular audacity and do it when the cameras were rolling. That Friday morning, cameras were present in abundance to document the historic convergence of Foo and his celebrated colleagues on Mavericks. It promised to be a momentous coming out for an underappreciated California wave.

Despite its proximity to San Francisco and Santa Cruz, as recently as 1990, only a handful of locals had ever heard of Mavericks, and only one brave soul—a townie named Jeff Clark—had actually surfed it. By and by, rumors started to drift up the coast about a mysto surf break near Half Moon Bay that generated thick, grinding barrels tall enough to drive a bus through. They were reputed to be at least as big as—and considerably more hollow than—the famous waves that rumbled ashore at Hawaii's Waimea Bay, the Mount Everest of surfing. Mavericks, moreover, gave off a vibe that made Waimea's daunting aura seem benign by comparison. A 1992 article by Ben Marcus in *Surfer* magazine described Mavericks as "gloomy, isolated, inherently evil. The reef is surrounded by deep water, and lies naked to every nasty thing above and below the Pacific: Aleutian swells, northwest winds, southeast storms, frigid currents, aggro elephant seals and wilder things that snack on aggro elephant seals." Taped to the wall of a bait shop at Pillar Point Harbor is a faded newspaper clipping about a local fisherman who pulled three great white sharks from the surrounding waters in a single day.

Initially, as luck would have it, the waves that Friday morning failed to live up to the inflated expectations of the visiting surfers and assembled media. As they paddled out to the lineup, none of the Waimea veterans was especially impressed or intimidated by what he saw. The epic surf of the preceding week had diminished somewhat. The crowds in the water and on the cliffs provided an uncharacteristic sense of security. "It was a little anticlimactic," Bradshaw confirms. "A few big sets came through, but nothing really huge. Everybody was just out there having fun."

Shortly before noon, however, Mavericks showed its true face. Somebody in the gallery on the cliffs yelled, "Set!" A procession of telltale black lines was rushing toward the point at 22 knots. Half a mile offshore, Bradshaw saw the approaching swells and maneuvered into position.

He let the first wave of the set roll under him, then started paddling in earnest for the next one. As the swell charged out of deep water and rushed over the reef, it humped up to the dimensions of a drive-in movie screen, seemed to pause for a beat to marshal its power, and began to topple forward. Digging hard down the surging face, Bradshaw noticed Foo—his friend, his longtime antagonist—several yards ahead and slightly to the right, scrambling for the same wave.

According to the unwritten rules of surfing, the wave belonged to Bradshaw, because he was "deeper"—that is, he was positioned closer to its peak, the part of the wave that would momentarily pitch shoreward and slam down. "But I was maybe a little too deep," Bradshaw reflects, "and I could see that Mark was already committed, so I decided to back out and let him have it." Pulling up abruptly, Bradshaw plunged his legs to either side of his board and jammed on the brakes.

The wave bucked to full height and then slid out from under him. Perched for a moment on the tottering, feathering crest, he caught a glimpse of Foo stroking powerfully down the face, ready to leap to his feet, in perfect position to make the wave. The motor drives of more than a dozen cameras, all trained at Foo, began to grind. It was the last time Bradshaw would see Foo alive.

Fairly or not, most of society regards surfing as a summer pastime for feckless adolescents. But big-wave surfing has little in common with fun and games at the beach. The incumbent hazards and challenges lend the activity a seriousness of purpose, a certain nobility, even.

Fewer than a hundred people in the world have the poise and reflexes to drop into the jaws of a 40-foot wave and emerge on their feet. As a wave increases in height, its mass increases exponentially, as does the energy released when it breaks. The difference between riding a head-high wave (the upper limit of most surfers) and riding a hollow, dredging 40-footer is roughly the difference between driving 35 miles per hour and driving 200 miles per hour.

Somewhere between 36 and 40 feet is the size at which big-wave surfing, as Bradshaw puts it, "starts to become real." Not that Bradshaw or any other self-respecting surfer would be caught dead referring to a 36-foot wave as a 36-foot wave. Big-wave surfers employ an arcane calculus of understatement, rigidly adhered to, whereby the height of a wave is pegged at roughly half the actual dimensions of the face. A wave that stands 36 feet from trough to crest is said to be an 18-footer, maybe a 20-footer if the surfer making the assessment is from California rather than Hawaii, and prone to wild exaggeration.

Big-wave surfing originated on the North Shore of Oahu in 1957, when Greg Noll first rode one of the fabled behemoths of Waimea Bay. A handful of others followed suit, and thereafter a fraternity of big-wave enthusiasts coalesced every November with the arrival of the Aleutian juice—potent winter ground swells out of the Gulf of Alaska. For the next twenty-five years, the club remained a tight, self-referential brotherhood, largely uncorrupted by the sporadic attention it received from the world at large. The club's culture was characterized by intense competition and undiluted machismo, but its members, for the most part, were concerned with impressing only one another.

That changed around 1983. The surf was exceptionally large and frequent that winter on the North Shore, and the wealth of astonishing photographs that appeared in the season's wake were widely noticed. After a long preoccupation with squirrelly, small-wave acrobatics and beach-punk attitude, the California-based surf magazines shifted their gaze to the purer, more elemental challenge of giant waves.

As the editorial limelight swung to Waimea and Todos Santos (a lesser big-wave spot off Ensenada, Mexico), corporate America woke up to the marketing potential of big surf. Ad execs discovered that heroic images of men confronting titanic waves could move a lot of product. It became possible for a talented surfer with a modicum of media savvy to earn a modest stipend riding big Waimea.

Coincidentally, 1983 was the year Mark Foo arrived on the scene at the bay. Through a combination of brazen self-promotion and utter fearlessness, he rapidly made a name for himself. Previously, most people rode big waves with a no-nonsense straight-line approach that reduced their chances of wiping out; Foo introduced a flashier style, attacking the giant Waimea waves with the same slashing abandon he demonstrated in small surf. "Mark charged big waves a little harder than most of the other guys out there," says his friend Dennis Pang, a respected North Shore surfer and board builder. "He definitely took bigger risks."

The big-wave brotherhood has always held audacity in high esteem, but a fine distinction is made between boldness and idiocy. The latter is termed *kook behavior* and is one of the worst epithets in the surfers' lexicon. Some of Foo's rivals initially branded him a kook, but his dazzling performance in the water kept the slur from sticking. Before long, indeed, Foo's hairball style informed and inspired a whole new crop of big-wave surfers.

Foo explained the risks he took by saying, "If you want to ride the ultimate wave, you have to be willing to pay the ultimate price." He recited this so often, to so many people, that it became a cliché. But he insisted earnestly to his closest friends that he had a strong feeling he was going to die young. Most of Foo's acquaintances, accustomed to his fondness for melodramatic pronouncements, didn't take him seriously and laughed it off.

A month after Mark Foo's drowning, a few blocks from what passes for downtown Half Moon Bay, Jeff Clark stands in his garage and ponders the tragedy. He, too, was out in the waves that Friday morning, surfing alongside the big-wave elite. On a certain level, as the man who brought Mavericks to the attention of the surfing world, Clark can't help feeling a measure of responsibility for the death of one of his personal heroes.

Ankle-deep in a clean white drift of foam shavings, Clark cuts short his dark ruminations, glances at an order form tacked to the wall, and switches on his electric planer. As he mows broad swaths of polyurethane, the sleek lines of a big-wave board gradually emerge from the crude slab of foam.

In the old days, they were referred to as rhino chasers or elephant guns. Their exaggerated length and spear-like proportions have long provided fodder for parlor analysts. But

sometimes—as Freud might have said if he'd surfed instead of smoked cigars—a surfboard is just a surfboard.

Big waves break with formidable speed. In order to catch one—in order to make it down the face ahead of the avalanching lip—a surfer needs a board that can be paddled very fast, which means it must have a very long waterline. The extended length also gives it the requisite stability for negotiating chop at high speed. Nobody in his right mind paddles into 20-foot-plus waves on anything shorter than 9 feet 6 inches.

After roughing out one side of the surfboard, Clark pauses to stare at his half-finished creation, then lays the planer carefully on its side and brushes the foam dust from his arms and shoulders. "You know"—he sighs—"I'm not really into this today. Too many things on my mind. Let's go check out Mavericks."

Clark, thirty-eight years old, is a taciturn, powerfully built man with ice-blue eyes. His unkempt hair is stiff with salt from an early morning surf session. He has lived within five miles of Mavericks since the age of nine.

Hidden behind high bluffs, Mavericks can't be seen from the highway unless you know where to look. It was first noticed in 1962 by a surfer from San Francisco named Alex Matienzo, who paddled out on a small swell and rode some mushy rollers breaking across the inner reef. He named the spot after his German shepherd, Maverick, who followed Matienzo into the waves.

Clark started thinking about surfing Mavericks as a teenager. Every winter he watched meaty, gaping barrels churn past the end of Pillar Point, and wondered why nobody rode them. In the winter of 1974–75 he paddled out alone to have a look, caught five burly waves on a 7-foot-3-inch board (it was the biggest stick he owned at the time), and thereby became the first person to surf Mavericks when it was actually going off.

Unable to convince anyone to join him—the waves were too big, the setting too intimidating—he continued to surf the outside peak by himself for the next fifteen years. Clark was itching to introduce others to Mavericks, to share his discovery, but he didn't mind the solitude. "Spending so much time alone out on the water," Clark says, "I got so I could sense how waves were going to break on a subconscious level." Day by day, year by year, he observed and mentally catalogued every nuance of wind, tide, and swell.

Clark didn't care if the surf was crummy. It didn't matter if he got stuffed by a wave, lost his board, and was forced to make the long swim in. "Tapping into all that power, realizing how small you are," he says, "I get stoked just being out there."

Although he is a surfer of extraordinary talent, Clark never had the chops to make a living on the cutthroat professional contest circuit. Clark admired Foo immensely, in no small part because Foo demonstrated that it was possible to fashion a viable career out of riding big waves. Foo's death—and the fact that he drowned at Mavericks—rocked Clark hard. It was as if Joe Montana had come into his home as a dinner guest, only to choke to death on a chicken bone. "I got there right after they found him," Clark says with a clear, unblinking gaze. "I saw this body in a wetsuit stretched out on the back deck of the boat—it just didn't seem possible that it was Mark."

Climbing the stairs to his cramped second-floor apartment, Clark grabs a pair of binoculars and heads out to the deck. By standing in one corner and leaning over the railing, he can look across the Cabrillo Highway and see a black slice of ocean, drawing an unobstructed bead on Mavericks, five miles up the coast. Squinting through the 10×50 lenses, every few minutes he observes a spume of whitewater erupt high over the sawtoothed cluster of sea stacks at the tip of Pillar Point.

"The swell is coming up," Clark remarks, his voice betraying an uncharacteristic trace of excitement. "Mavericks will probably go off this afternoon on the minus tide."

The outer reef at Mavericks squats 21 feet below the ocean's surface, a mesa of submerged rock sloping abruptly out of deep water. Swells smaller than 10 or 12 feet roll right over the reef without even breaking. But whenever a cell of concentrated low pressure slides down the winter storm track and starts pushing fat, long-interval ground swells ahead of it, Clark keeps his ear glued to his NOAA weather radio for the buoy reports. As the swells come pulsing ashore, the first thing they hit after 2,000 miles of open ocean is Mavericks. Rocketing up the front of the reef like a skier flying off a jump, wave after wave gets launched to astonishing heights.

California is said to be home to more than a million surfers. Why, then, did it take so long for any of them to realize that some of the biggest waves on the planet broke right under their noses? It's not as though Clark tried to keep Mavericks secret. "I wanted someone to surf with," Clark says. "I told a lot of people that Mavericks was a world-class wave, but coming from someone like me it didn't mean anything."

There are some kick-ass surfers in San Francisco, and even more in Santa Cruz, but they were blinded by their provincialism. At the time, it was simply inconceivable to the big dogs of Ocean Beach and Steamer Lane that an unknown surfer from a backwater like Half Moon Bay could have discovered a new wave worthy of their attention.

It wasn't until 1990 that outsiders finally started to sit up and take notice of Mavericks. On January 22, a northwest swell of historic dimensions came ashore up and down the California coast. Jeff Clark had driven into the city to work on a construction project, but when he heard the buoy reports coming over the weather radio, he fled the job site and headed immediately to nearby Ocean Beach. There, in the parking lot, he ran into

two well-known Santa Cruz surfers, Dave Schmidt and Tom Powers.

The surf at Ocean Beach had redlined and gone off the scale. Unrideable 30-foot closeout sets were pounding the outer reef with extraordinary violence. Paddling out looked suicidal. Clark told the others that he knew a place where the waves would be even bigger, and perfectly shaped. Powers and Schmidt were skeptical, but followed Clark down to Half Moon Bay.

Clark led them up to a bluff north of Pillar Point and pointed out Mavericks just as a set thundered through. "Dave's jaw dropped," remembers Clark, "and he goes, 'Oh my God! That's Waimea!' Then he starts pacing back and forth, back and forth, looking out at the waves, saying, 'That's huge! I don't believe what I'm seeing! That's Waimea!'" The two newcomers nervously paddled out with Clark. Before the day was over, Schmidt had ridden six waves, Powers caught two, and both men were awed by Clark's performance.

At one point Clark fell as he dropped into a yawning barrel, got crushed by the lip when the wave collapsed, and was held down so long he wondered very seriously if he would have enough breath to make it back to the surface. At the conclusion of the session, everyone was still alive, though, and by the time they left the water, the Santa Cruz surfers were believers.

Over the next two winters, many of the boldest, baddest surfers in California showed up to see if Mavericks was for real. Of those who had also surfed Waimea, most agreed that the California wave broke as big and as thick as anything on the North Shore—and that mistakes at Mavericks are apt to have much more serious consequences. The water is 30 degrees colder than in Hawaii, sapping strength, cramping muscles, significantly reducing the length of time one can hold one's

breath. And the necessity of wearing a restrictive, buoyant wetsuit makes it harder to dive under waves in the impact zone.

The scariest thing about Mavericks, though, is the rocks. The outside peak breaks in such a way that any surfer who blows the drop and eats shit early is very likely to get flushed into the boneyard—a jumble of jagged truck-size boulders, against which he will be brutally pounded by each incoming wave.

Clark, who has paid some stiff dues of his own in the boneyard, says solemnly, "Before you paddle out, you need to think real carefully about the worst-case scenario, and then ask yourself if you're ready to deal with it. Mavericks punishes mistakes more severely than other waves. I've seen some bad things happen out there."

After flying all night from Honolulu, Ken Bradshaw steered the rental car into the rutted beach parking lot at Pillar Point, and he and Mark Foo climbed stiffly out into the morning sun. They were an unlikely looking pair: built like a tight end, with chiseled All-American features, Bradshaw towered over the 5-foot-8-inch Foo, who had the imperturbable face of a Confucian priest. The fact that they had come to Mavericks as close friends was perhaps even more unlikely, given their long and often bitter rivalry.

At thirty-six, Foo was the younger of the two by five years. He still had the taut physique of a flyweight boxer, but the flesh beneath Foo's chin was beginning to slacken, and the skin around his eyes was deeply furrowed. Twenty-six years in the surf was starting to take its toll.

Born in Singapore to parents of Chinese descent, Foo spent most of his childhood in greater Washington, D.C., where his father worked for the U.S. Information Agency. He didn't learn to surf or even swim until the family moved to Hawaii when

he was ten, but once introduced to the sport, he resolved to make surfing the whole of his existence.

In 1970, Foo's father was posted back to Washington and the family resettled in suburban Maryland, a move the headstrong twelve-year-old could not abide. Two years after arriving on the East Coast, much to his family's dismay, Foo ran off to Florida to make his mark as a surfer. "Good Chinese boys did not aspire to be surfers," says SharLyn Foo-Wagner, Mark's older sister. "My mother would have preferred he had become a lawyer or a doctor, like our brother, Wayne."

The three Foo children grew up comfortably in a family whose values were more mainstream American than traditional Chinese, according to SharLyn. "Our dad was your basic Middle American, detached, workaholic father. Our mom was strong-willed, independent, a feminist from way back." Wherever it came from, she says, the Foo kids "were all super intense from an early age."

By the time he was seventeen, Mark had found his way to the North Shore of Oahu, the white-hot nexus of the surfing universe, where he immersed himself in the tournament circuit. Initially, his results were promising, but in 1982, having climbed no higher than 66th in the world professional rankings, he was forced to accept that he would never be a star in that arena.

In what proved to be a stroke of brilliance, Foo decided to abandon the pro tour and concentrate instead on getting his image into print, an enterprise for which he turned out to have rare talent. By establishing a close, symbiotic relationship with the top surf photographers, Foo got his picture on the cover of the two major surfing magazines half a dozen times—more often than any of the world champions who'd surfed circles around him on the contest circuit.

His ubiquitous presence in magazines and videos and on television earned him promotional contracts from several

surf-related companies, who paid Foo modest sums to be a human billboard for their products. At one point, he even landed a sponsorship deal with Anheuser-Busch, but Foo never got rich. Because he was a freelancer, operating outside the structure of the pro tour, he seldom cleared more than $30,000 annually. But it gave him the means to surf whenever and wherever he wanted, and that was sufficient to win the lasting enmity of envious associates.

Other surfers heaped opprobrium on Foo for his single-minded pursuit of publicity—he didn't surf, they groused, unless the cameras were pointed his way—but he remained remarkably unaffected by the criticism, and continued his quest for surfing glory with unabashed enthusiasm. "Yeah, bruddah Mark loved to have his picture taken," chuckles Dennis Pang, one of Foo's oldest and closest friends. "He caught a lot of shit for it, but it was like water off a duck's back."

In 1983, Foo surfed Waimea Bay for the first time. Unfazed by the bay's mythic reputation, he attacked the enormous waves with a bravado that forced the old guard to take grudging note. In January 1985, Foo took off on a Waimea wave said to be in excess of 60 feet—bigger than anything ever ridden. He dropped off the overhanging ledge, immediately tumbled into the water, and was smothered by the full force of the wave. The impact of the falling lip snapped Foo's board and worked him over like a rag in a wringer, but he popped to the surface unharmed and was quickly plucked from the impact zone by a rescue helicopter.

Even though he hadn't even come close to making the wave, Foo wasted no time in sending accounts of the attempt to magazines around the world, and when these articles were published, they cemented his reputation as a big-wave demigod. In an interview soon thereafter, Foo suggested, "In terms of performance, I don't think anyone surfs Waimea better than I do."

Ken Bradshaw, the reigning king of Waimea at the time, didn't share this opinion. He had been surfing Waimea for nine years before Foo ever dipped a toe in the bay, and the younger surfer's presumptuousness, his braggadocio—his lack of respect—tweaked Bradshaw. Foo lived just down the Kam Highway from Bradshaw, and the two surfers encountered each other often, both in and out of the water. As Foo's meteoric rise continued, those encounters became more and more strained.

The nadir in their relationship occurred in 1987, on the morning of a major surf contest at Sunset Beach. During the warm-up period before competition got under way, according to Pang, "Mark kept dropping in on Bradshaw, stealing his waves, and finally Kenny went ballistic. He went after Mark in the channel and started beating him up, dunking him underwater, holding him down. Ken didn't really hurt Mark, but he embarrassed him in front of all the best surfers in the world. When Mark came in, he called me right away and told me how upsetting it was. He got over it really fast, though. A couple of days later it was like nothing had ever happened. Mark just didn't let that kind of stuff bother him."

A corollary of Foo's unwavering drive was that he was relentlessly, obdurately optimistic. He was convinced it was his destiny to achieve greatness on giant waves. When things got hairy out there, his belief in fate allowed him to maintain a sense of clarity and inner calm. Foo was a religious man; in raging surf—as nowhere else—he felt the rampant presence of the almighty, so close he could taste it in the back of his throat.

Although Foo was monomaniacal and self-absorbed, when it suited him he could be extremely personable, even gregarious. There was something winning about his fervor, his childlike enthusiasm. At least five people considered him their best friend. "You either really liked Mark," says SharLyn, "or you really didn't like Mark. Nobody was indifferent."

For all the derring-do he exhibited in the water, Foo never quite fit the macho cut of the big-wave brotherhood. He was way too willing to discuss his innermost feelings, to bare his emotional underbelly. He wasn't afraid to get touchy-feely. Women fell for Foo hard and often. He showered his sister and mother with earnest, mawkish letters. "Mark and I were so tight," SharLyn acknowledges, "that some people thought we had a kind of weird relationship."

The week before he flew to Mavericks, Foo got engaged to twenty-eight-year-old Lisa Nakano. "He was really in love with Lisa," says Allen Sarlo, one of Foo's closest friends. "And his mom approved of her, which was of major importance to Mark."

Sarlo grows silent for several seconds, then says, "What makes this whole thing kind of heavy is that his older brother, Wayne, died two years ago, just after finishing medical school, and his dad died about three years ago. And recently Mark wrote a letter to his mom telling her that he loved her so much he didn't think he could ever live without her, that he wanted to die before she did. Mark's death has been really devastating to her."

By the time they got their boards out and wetsuits on, it was after nine A.M. when Foo and Bradshaw stroked through the shore break toward the Mavericks lineup. Given the vitriol that had flowed between them over the years, some were taken aback to see the two surfers paddling out together, but their friendship was genuine, insists Dennis Pang: "It wasn't just on the surface. About eight months before Mark died, he and Kenny became real friends."

Last summer Foo explained to a British television crew that he and Bradshaw had "gotten past" their differences, thanks to a bond based on the singular intensity of their shared calling:

"We've experienced things that nobody but he and I have ever done."

Acquaintances credit the rapprochement primarily to the mellowing of Bradshaw. After two decades of proving his mettle at the bay, his place in the hallowed Waimea pantheon was secure. Comfortable in his emerging role as a respected elder of the big-wave fraternity, Bradshaw no longer felt the need to go one-on-one with every swaggering young turk who paddled out. He finally seemed able to accept Foo for who he was, warts and all; Bradshaw found himself reacting with amusement to quirks of Foo's personality that would have triggered apoplectic rage just a few years before.

The previous spring, Foo and Bradshaw had surfed a secret North Shore reef together, a spot called Outside Alligators that Bradshaw discovered and pioneered. "We got some exceptional waves out there," Bradshaw reminisces. "And the place was completely private. Then, after what Mark claimed was maybe the best surf session of his life, he came right in and made, like, thirty phone calls, and suddenly the whole world knew about it. The next time I went out, fifteen guys were there.

"While he was making those calls, I was saying, 'Mark! Put the damn phone down! No one else has to hear about this spot. We can keep enjoying it by ourselves.' But he never saw it like that. He had to share everything with the world." Bradshaw erupts into a deep, ambivalent laugh. "That's just the way Mark was: high-profile all the way."

December 23 marked Foo's first visit to Mavericks, though not Bradshaw's. He'd flown over on several previous occasions, but, he says, "My timing was always a little off. I kept missing the really big days."

Bradshaw had in fact just been to California six days earlier. He spent part of Saturday, December 17, surfing Mavericks in mediocre conditions, then jumped on a plane and flew back to

Hawaii the following morning after hearing that a giant swell was predicted for the North Shore. "Not waiting around a little longer in California was a huge mistake," Bradshaw dolefully concedes. "One of the all-time big mistakes I've ever made."

Even as Bradshaw's jet was hurtling toward Honolulu, an intense 934-millibar low had spun down out of the Gulf of Alaska and stalled off the California coast, commencing a week of the largest, most perfect waves anyone in the state had seen in decades, maybe ever.

"Monday the nineteenth, Mavericks was off the chart," says Mark Renneker, a San Francisco physician who at forty-three is an eminent figure in that city's surfer community. "Wednesday was even bigger."

Jeff Clark, Renneker, a rising star named Evan Slater, a hot Santa Cruz surfer named Peter Mel—everyone present that week knew they were witnessing something momentous. Set after set, somebody would catch the wave of his life. A sixteen-year-old kid from Santa Cruz took off on a wave estimated to be at least 50 feet high, a deed that would put him on the cover of *Surfer*. "Jay Moriarity," the tag line proclaimed, "drops into history at Mavericks."

"When I called Doc Renneker from Oahu and heard what I'd missed," says Bradshaw, "I turned into a basket case." He and Foo jumped on the red-eye and landed in San Francisco as the sun came up Friday morning, hustled out to Mavericks, and were greeted with the news that the surf had gone down overnight. The swell had turned sporadic. Few of the waves were breaking bigger than 25 feet—surf Hawaiians would call 12 to 15 feet.

A big set would steamroll through now and then, however, and the action was pitched among the fifteen surfers jockeying for the waves. The sudden arrival of Foo and Bradshaw cranked up the intensity even higher. "It was a circus out there," says Renneker. "You had these boatloads of photogra-

phers, the helicopter, people on the cliffs—and a gaggle of the world's best surfers at Mavericks for the first time. No one had to be told this was a historic day. A good showing in front of all those cameras could make a career. There was incredible pressure to perform."

"The crowd was almost in a frenzy," Clark concurs. "Guys were pushing it maybe a little too far." In the old days, before Foo taught everyone the value of a dramatic photograph, a more conservative attitude prevailed in big waves. Wiping out was considered kook behavior, not to mention dangerous. But the proliferation of sponsorship contracts based on photo incentives changed all that. Because taking off late and deep—down the steepest, most concave part of the wave—creates the most spectacular pictures, ambitious surfers are strongly motivated to hang it out farther and farther, and the consequences be damned.

"As long as you make the drop," muses Bradshaw, "the photographers don't give a shit whether you stay on your feet and actually make the wave. All they want is those three killer shots down the face." That Friday at Mavericks, he says, "Most guys were taking off ridiculously deep for the cameras, and there were some nasty wipeouts as a result."

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing," insists Renneker. "Here were the best big-wave surfers in the world, and they were behaving like fools. Partly it was the fact that some of the guys surfing Mavericks for the first time were underestimating it. Because it was only a California wave, they refused to believe it was as serious as the surf they were used to on the North Shore. But mostly it was just Kodak courage: doing stuff they wouldn't consider doing if the cameras weren't there. And Mark was right in there with them, just as far out of position, making the same mistakes."

Perhaps, Bradshaw concedes. "But what's so strange is that

when Mark took off on the wave that killed him, he was not deep. He was right where he should have been."

Foo had ridden about a dozen waves when, shortly before noon, he saw a beefy set rear up on the horizon. As calculated from photographs, the wave he went for stood approximately 30 feet from trough to crest. Less experienced surfers had ridden larger waves earlier in the week without incident. Foo himself had handled much bigger, gnarlier surf at Waimea on numerous occasions.

He let the first wave of the set go by, then spun around and dug hard for the second. His takeoff looked good. Foo jumped into his trademark crouch as the wave pulled to concave, his arms stretched wide and low for balance. He maintained control when the board went into free fall beneath the overhanging ledge, and seemed to be in equilibrium as he reestablished contact with the wave halfway down the face.

Mavericks, however, is a famously nervous, unpredictable wave. "The bottom configuration, the energy vectors—everything out there is incredibly complex," explains Renneker. "As a consequence, the wave goes through these strange kinks and lifts and drops, all happening in microseconds. You never know what's going to happen next. Mark's surfing reflexes were as good as anybody's in the world, but on some waves there's just nothing you can do to avoid a wipeout."

As Foo angled down the face, observes Allen Sarlo, "the wave jacked and the bottom just fell out of it." Foo's board veered suddenly to the left, the inside rail bogged in some chop, and Foo was thrown violently off the front.

He slammed into the water with tremendous force, a hard belly flop that wrenched his arms back and hyperextended his spine. Foo skipped down the face like a flat stone, and never

penetrated the wave far enough to have a shot at escaping out the other side. Embedded in the wall of the heaving green barrel, he was drawn back up the face and sucked over the falls. Viewed in slow motion, the video shows Foo's ghostly silhouette suspended in the roof as the wave throws forward, arches down, and then crashes into the pit with a horrific explosion of whitewater that splintered his board into three pieces.

As Foo had lived, so he died: in the camera's mythologizing eye. More than a hundred people saw Foo get buried by the collapsing lip, and every aspect of the wipeout was captured on film and videotape. Several seconds later, however, Brock Little and Mike Parsons—a renowned big-wave surfer from Orange County who was also surfing Mavericks for the first time that day—took off together on the next wave of the set, and as the immense shimmering wall reared and started to fold over, all eyes turned to watch their ride unfold. Nobody noticed that Foo didn't return to the surface.

As Parsons and Little dropped down the face side by side, the nose of Parsons's board pearled and he went down hard. Two seconds later, Little was mowed, too.

Falling onto his back, Parsons was slammed in the chest by the guillotining lip and driven toward the bottom. "It was maybe the worst wipeout I'd ever had," says Parsons. "It took a really long time to come up. At that point I didn't know the worst was still coming." As he struggled back to the surface, desperate for a lungful of air, he was bumped sharply by what felt like someone's head and arm. At the time, he mistakenly assumed it was Little. It was actually Foo.

Little, by that point, was fighting for his own life about 20 yards away. Caught in the boneyard, pounded repeatedly by incoming waves, both Parsons and Little were swept into the rocks. The leash running from Little's board to his right ankle—a 15-foot polyethylene line strong enough to pull a truck—snagged on a submerged boulder, nearly drowning

him, then snapped, and Little was eventually carried through a gap into the safety of the inner lagoon.

Parsons's leash also snagged, but he wasn't so lucky. "I was pinned underwater," he remembers, "getting slammed into a rock by the waves, unable to get a breath. Out of air, I was absolutely sure I was going to drown. I'd written it off and was waiting to die when the wave action suddenly unhooked the leash. I got to the surface, but I took a bad beating before the current finally washed me into the lagoon."

Foo was still nowhere to be seen, meanwhile, and in the excitement over what was happening to Parsons and Little, his absence went unobserved. Bradshaw, outside the surf line, his view blocked by the back of the breaking wave, had no way of knowing that anybody was in trouble. Fifty seconds after backing out of Foo's wave, oblivious to what was happening in the impact zone, Bradshaw took off on the set's last and biggest wave. He nailed the drop, carved hard across the bottom, then charged through the bowl and down the line, covering nearly 300 yards before the whitewater overtook him and knocked him off his board.

Paddling back out to the lineup past the media boats, still buzzing with residual adrenaline, Bradshaw paused to chat with a photographer named Bob Barbour. "Barbour told me that Mark ate it really bad," says Bradshaw, "and that it looked like he'd broken his board. I didn't figure it was a big deal—people break boards all the time. When Mark didn't show up, I just assumed he'd gone in to get another board."

Around one P.M., the sky clouded over and a stiff onshore breeze began to blow, messing up the waves. Surfers started to leave the water, the helicopter departed, the media boats headed in. The *Deeper Blue* started motoring toward the harbor with Parsons, Evan Slater, and two photographers on board. Just beyond the jetty guarding the harbor entrance, somebody noticed the tail block of a purple and yellow surf-

board drifting in an eddy. "That looks like Mark's board," Slater casually observed as they cruised past. "Let's go pick it up for him." Then Slater noticed what appeared to be a half-submerged human figure, clad in a black wetsuit, floating face-down beside the broken surfboard. Refusing to believe what they were seeing, someone insisted over and over that it was just a ball of kelp. "No," Parsons replied, feeling dizzy, "that's not kelp." Slater dove in, pulled Foo to the side of the boat, and the others hauled his motionless body onto the back deck.

Until that moment, nobody even suspected Foo was missing. He'd been in the water for more than an hour. The captain immediately radioed the harbor patrol, two paramedics arrived within minutes, but all attempts to revive Foo failed.

Not long thereafter, Bradshaw, one of the last surfers still on the water, caught a final sloppy wave and headed for the beach. In the parking lot, he was approached by Jeff Clark. Stammering, barely able to speak, Clark told him about Foo, and Bradshaw sprinted down to the dock. "I told the sheriff I wanted see Mark," he says, his voice growing thick. "I had to see him with my own eyes to know it was true." Pulling back the blanket that covered the body, Bradshaw looked down at the face of his friend and turned away.

The autopsy determined that the cause of death was saltwater drowning; why Foo drowned remains unclear, however. "It was a heavy wipeout," says Bradshaw, "getting swept over the falls like that, but the same thing has happened a hundred times to all of us."

Foo was found with a small laceration over his right eye and an abrasion across his forehead. Renneker examined the body, however, and he insists that "the head wounds were really very superficial. It's possible that he hit his board and was knocked unconscious, but the pathologist found nothing under the skull to suggest that. My speculation, which is shared by Jeff Clark and others, is that he probably got caught on the bottom."

The ocean floor in the vicinity of Mavericks is riddled with caves, crevices, and sharp, stony projections that bristle like stalks of petrified cauliflower. Foo's body—or his board or his leash—could easily have snagged on some rocky feature that held him underwater, just as Little and Parsons were snagged and held down.

Most of the surfers who were present at Mavericks that day view Foo's death as a freak accident. This may well be the case. But nagging doubts remain.

Much has been made of the fact that death was a subject Foo thought about—and talked about—with great frequency. "Mark often told me that when it was time for him to go, he wanted to die surfing the ultimate wave," says his friend Allen Sarlo. "He told that to everybody. I'd tell him, 'Hey, Mark, you don't have to die to surf the ultimate wave.' But he'd always reply that I didn't understand. He really believed that sooner or later he was going to die surfing."

Foo's friends didn't know what to make of his morbid preoccupation and had trouble reconciling it with the rest of his personality. He didn't exhibit suicidal tendencies and drove his car with the exaggerated caution of an old man. Reckless behavior was anathema to Foo—he almost never drank, didn't even smoke weed. Except for riding big waves, he was loath to engage in hazardous activities of any kind, and the risks he took in the water were very calculated. He spoke enthusiastically to Lisa Nakano, his fiancée, about having children after they were married.

Nakano adds, however, that on numerous occasions Foo mentioned having "this strong feeling he wouldn't live very long. It didn't bum him out or alter the way he conducted his life, but he was convinced he was going to die surfing. He

calmly accepted it. At the time, I didn't take him seriously. I don't think anybody did."

Because Foo was in the habit of making overwrought declarations, confirms SharLyn, "most people thought all that stuff about dying was bullshit. Statistically, big-wave surfing just isn't that dangerous."

Rick Grigg fractured his neck at Waimea in 1982. A huge wave snapped Titus Kinimaka's femur there in '89. Foo himself had scars up and down his body from collisions with North Shore coral heads. He shattered an ankle surfing big Pipeline two years ago, and last spring a surfboard fin sliced into his left kneecap, severing tendons and wreaking general havoc. But for all the famous close calls and near-death experiences, Foo was the first expert surfer to die in big waves since 1943. On the face of it, the evidence suggests that surfing giant waves is much less hazardous than climbing, say, or even heli-skiing.

Was it just a fluke, then, that two consecutive waves judged to be of unexceptional size—waves described as 15 to 18 feet by the survivors—killed one of the world's most accomplished surfers, and very nearly killed two others?

The reassuring statistics about the safety of big waves mostly reflect the safety of Waimea Bay, where, until very recently, virtually all big-wave surfing took place. The water there is 82 degrees Fahrenheit, there are no hazards equivalent to the rocks at Mavericks, and the Waimea surf line is patrolled by lifeguards on Jet Skis. A rescue helicopter is on standby.

Mavericks is without question a much more dangerous patch of ocean, and people have been surfing it in significant numbers for less than three years. As more and more surfers visit Mavericks, there will probably be other fatalities, and the statistical likelihood of dying in big waves will have to be adjusted upward.

Not that a murderous reputation is likely to scare elite surfers away. To the contrary, it will probably draw even more of them to Mavericks, just as the malevolent mystique of the Eiger attracts mountaineers in droves. In cultures that idealize boldness—as both climbing and big-wave surfing do—the more dangerous a challenge, the greater the prestige of those who meet it. Nobody understood this better than Foo.

His death is woven through with dark ironies, not least of which is the fact that for years people accused him of overstating the danger of huge surf. But how much was Foo to blame for his own demise? Was he playing too much to the cameras that Friday morning? Did he get careless and make a critical mistake? The answer to both of the latter queries seems to be no. He appeared to be doing everything right on the wave that killed him. Foo, famous for his showboating, was surfing with uncharacteristic prudence when he lost his life.

On December 30, a memorial service attended by 700 people was held on the North Shore of Oahu. More than 150 men and women paddled surfboards into the middle of Waimea Bay to pay their final respects, held hands to form a circle, and cast leis into the sea. Some words were spoken, everyone called out Foo's name thrice, and then Dennis Pang pulled a box of ashes from his backpack and returned Foo to the waves.

After the ceremony, trying to put a positive spin on their loss, several people observed that in making such a theatrical exit at Mavericks, Foo managed to achieve his grandest ambition. In death, he moved beyond mere fame and entered the more enduring sphere of legend. "My bruddah Mark," Pang speculates, "he's sitting up there somewhere, smiling and combing his hair, saying, 'Yeah, top that one!' "

According to SharLyn Foo-Wagner, their mother derives little solace from such thoughts: "My mom is mad. She accepted Mark for what he was, but she never really understood him. It's no comfort to her that Mark was doing what he wanted to be doing when he died. She thinks it's such a waste."

At first light on a fogbound California morning, Jeff Clark walks down the beach to the end of Pillar Point and considers the steel-gray expanse of the Pacific. A big west swell is booming over the outer reef, sending mares' tails of spindrift arching high over the barreling waves. Clark zips up his wetsuit, waits for a lull between sets, and starts paddling out. It has been four days since Foo died. Nobody has surfed Mavericks since.

Clark duck-dives under a small inside wave, then catches the outgoing surge and works the rip into the channel. Fifteen minutes later, he's at the lineup. Straddling his board beyond the surf line, for a long time he just stares out to sea, aligning his senses to the ocean's rhythms, trying to sort out the disturbing events of the preceding week—trying, as he would later put it, "to get real clear about Mark's death."

To the west, the surface of the Pacific lifts into a series of sharp black ridges, and the incoming set yanks Clark from his reverie. He lets the first swell roll under him, and the second, then levers his board around and starts to paddle. The sea heaves up beneath him into a towering green peak, vaulting Clark heavenward even as he strokes furiously down the face. As the wave lurches to its apogee, he jumps to his feet and plunges toward the abyss. Above his head, the crest feathers and throws forward into an immense translucent arch.

There are no photographers present, no crowds or boats or helicopters—just Clark, alone, streaking down a colossal wall of salt water. After twenty years, the act still gives him the same pleasure it always has, that shudder of bliss and transcendence. His mind clear and untroubled for the first time in days, Clark accelerates across the trough, leans hard to set the rail, and carves a tight, elegant arc as the wave curls over and tries to swallow him—a roaring, spinning tornado, spewing foam, bearing down fast on his blind side.

LIVING UNDER THE VOLCANO

At 14,410 feet above sea level, I have to pause for breath between each plodding step as I reach the crest of Mount Rainier, the highest point in the Cascade Range. I've climbed this huge volcano many times over the past thirty years—for fun, for exercise, for escape from the urban grind. On this occasion, however, the impetus is morbid curiosity.

Recent geological reports have suggested that Rainier poses a serious threat to thousands of people who live in the shadow of the mountain, as I do, even if it does not erupt. My hope is that this ascent will shed a little light on the matter. Two days of strenuous effort were required to reach the top. Now a surly wind is screaming across the summit crater, flash-freezing the skin on my face and turning my mittened hands into blocks of ice.

Before my eyes is a swath of country that stretches from Canada to central Oregon, some two hundred miles away. Scanning the craggy spine of the Cascades, one can't help noticing that this corner of the planet is lousy with volcanoes: from this lofty vantage, I count no fewer than nine of them. The most riveting—and most notorious—is Mount St. Helens, whose truncated cone squats immediately to the southwest. At the moment, its yawning crater is belching a plume of steam high into the troposphere, a gentle admonition that St. Helens—along with some two dozen other Cascade peaks—is very much an active volcano.

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